Submission to the Standing Committee

on Privileges and Elections

Concerning Bill C-74
"An Act to Amend the Constitution Act, 1967
and the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act"

By the Canadian Labour Congress

November 12, 1985

opeiu 225 Ottawa, Ontario

The Canadian Labour Congress would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear and express some of the concerns of the Congress with respect to Bill C-74.

The Canadian Labour Congress considers the subject matter of Bill C-74 to be of great importance. In our view the issues surrounding representation in the House of Commons are fundamental to Canadian democracy and our system of government. R. MacGregor Dawson has said that "The House of Commons is the great democratic agency in the government of Canada; the grand inquest of the nation; the organized medium through which the public will finds expression and exercises its ultimate political power... . The fundamental importance of the House of Commons is thus derived from its essential representative character, the fact that it can speak, as no other body in the democracy can pretend to speak, for the people".[1.]

Basic Principles of House of Commons Electoral Representation

Because the issue of representation in the House of Commons is so fundamental to our system of government, principles have been developed in the allocation of seats. The first and basic principle is of course, representation by population, that there should be approximate equality in the population of constituencies. In this way, it can be assured that a vote in one part of the country will have relatively the same weight as a vote in another.

It it recognized that due to our unique geography and historical development this first principle of representation by population must in some regions of the nation give way to historical and other precedents. Thus there is the principle that the population of rural constituencies should be less than urban constituencies but with the premise that the populations of urban constituencies should be approximately equal across the nation, and the population of rural constituencies should be approximately equal across the nation[2.]. Special consideration has been given to large sparsely populated areas of the country. This modification of representation by population has been applied, and in our view

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1. R. MacGregor Dawson, The Government of Canada, 5th Edition, 1970, p. 304.
2. R. MacGregor Dawson, The Government of Canada, 4th Revised Edition, 1963, p. 341-42.

should be applied to the northern regions of all the provinces from British Columbia to Quebec, but including Newfoundland. In the northern regions there are often hundreds of small, isolated communities, many of which can be reached only by bush plane or winter highways. For a Member of Parliament in such northern regions to meet the needs of the constituents may require days of arduous travel. Moreover, these communities are often not served by a variety of media services or even postal services of the same quality one would see in an urban area. Finally, it is often the perception of residents of these communities that the Member of Parliament is their only real connection to political decision-making and their government.

Similarly, in certain regions of the Maritime provinces constituencies may, because of historical and constitutional precedent, have a lower population than the principle of representation by population applied across the nation would dictate. Canadians have accepted these modifications to the principle of representation by population and in our view will continue to accept it.

These are fundamental principles that can be seen to have been operative over the past century in various House of Commons electoral representation formulas. It is the submission of the Canadian Labour Congress that any new formula should also observe these principles, beginning with the basic principle of representation by population, and applying the modifications to the principle as they may apply in the particular case.

Bill C-74

It is the view of the Canadian Labour Congress that if the provisions of Bill C-74 are examined from the perspective of the foregoing principles -- the scheme of electoral representation contained in Bill C-74 is at odds with nearly all of the principles. From the perspective of the basic principle -- representation by population, Bill C-74 will result in gross inequities, between constituencies in provinces where population growth is rapid and constituencies in provinces where population growth is

rather slow. For example if population projections for the year 2001 are examined, the electoral quotient under Bill C-74 for British Columbia will be 101,681, while for New Brunswick it will be 80,170, a difference of over 21,000 people.

If one examines the situation from the perspective of northern and rural constituencies (excluding the Yukon and Northwest Territories) especially in provinces such as British Columbia and Ontario it would appear that some northern rural constituencies will become even larger in size in the future as seats within those provinces are redistributed to faster growth urban areas under the provisions of Bill C-74.

It is the view of the Canadian Labour Congress that such disparities in constituency populations between provinces, and trends to larger northern rural constituencies are totally at odds with the basic principle of representation by population, and the accepted modifications thereto, and as such do injustice to the greatest democratic agency in our system of government -- the House of Commons.

In addition to this fundamental problem with Bill C-74, that it is totally at odds with the basic principle of democratic government -- representation by population, there are also problems with the premises that have been argued in support of the Bill, one of which is the lowering of the cost of government services. It is the position of the Canadian Labour Congress that if the cost of government services is a problem, there are other areas which should be examined. First there is the Senate. Abolition of the Senate would save at least $31 million annually in the costs of government services which might then be allocated to ensuring that the "house of democracy", the House of Commons exists under a "representational formula which is truly democratic".

Behind the question of how costs of government services could be decreased however, is the context in which the claim of cutting costs is being made. In the past year, the Prime Minister's Office has increased in size by 57 per cent. In addition the PMO is receiving new direct

electronic mail equipment costing nearly $8.9 million. The first question which this brings to mind is -- How can claims of "We need to cut the cost of government services", be made when these kinds of expenditures are being made? The second and more fundamental question is -- "How can it be argued that the most democratic institution of our system of government -- must adopt an undemocratic electoral formula in the interests of cutting government service costs, while other closely associated institutions of government are maintaining or increasing their expenditures?"

Another premise which has been advanced in relation to this Bill, is -- that by limiting the number of members the character and effectiveness of the House of Commons will be preserved. In our view if the provisions of this Bill address the character and effective workings of the House, they do so only incidentally. The efficiency, effectiveness and meaningfulness of the internal workings of the House of Commons rest on reforms such as stronger and more powerful committee systems, not in restricting the number of members of the House.

The Need for Reform

In the view of the Canadian Labour Congress, there may in fact be a need to reform the House of Commons electoral representation formula. But any new representation formula must subscribe to the principles of representation by population to a greater degree than the provisions of Bill C-74 and should also address the issue of the Senate. In our view there are several strong arguments for maintaining the existing formula of representation into the next federal election (expected in mid-1988 or early 1989) and using the 4-year period to devise a representation formula which is in greater accord with the representation by population rule:

1. $5 million has already been expended to prepare for a federal election under the existing electoral formula. This expenditure should not be thrown away.

2. The increase in members under the existing formula using 1981 census data would result in 28 additional members to the House of Commons which cannot by any means be termed an unmanageable number.

3. The existing formula is a superior formula to that proposed in Bill C-74 in that it more closely subscribes to the principle of representation by population, and also accords more representation to sparsely populated northern regions of Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario and the Western Provinces.

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Summary

The position of the Canadian Labour Congress on Bill C-74 may be summarized as follows:

1. The issues surrounding electoral representation in the House of Commons are fundamental to Canadian democracy and our system of government because the House of Commons is the essential representative body of our government and speaks as no other body can, for the people.

2. The overarching principle in House of Commons electoral representation is that of representation by population. Special modification of this principle is made for the sparsely populated northern regions of some provinces in order to insure that the electoral constituencies in these regions do not become unreasonably large.

3. The Bill C-74 electoral formula is unsatisfactory primarily because it does not follow the principle of representation by population to a sufficient degree, and secondly because it will eventually lead to unreasonably large electoral constituencies in the northern regions of some provinces.

4. The arguments which have been advanced in favour of Bill C-74, namely additional costs, and undesirable effects on the character of the House of Commons are without merit. Spending is being increased or maintained on related but less democratic bodies of government, for example the PMO and the Senate, while the most democratic

body of all is to be limited. Arguments regarding the character, efficiency and effectiveness of the House of Commons are best addressed through internal procedural reforms of the House.

5. For the following reasons the existing electoral formula should be maintained, at least for the next election which is expected in 1988 or 1989:

a) The existing formula is superior to that proposed in Bill C-74 in that it more closely subscribes to the primary principle of representation by population, and also accords more representation to sparsely populated northern regions of Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario and the Western Provinces.

b) The increase in members under the existing formula using 1981 census data would result in 28 additional members to the House of Commons, which cannot by any means be termed an unmanageable number.

c) $5 million has already been expended to prepare for a federal election under the existing electoral formula. This expenditure should not be thrown away.

6. While the existing House of Commons is maintained into the next election, an electoral formula should be drafted which properly subscribes to the principle of representation by population and the accepted modifications of that principle.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the
Canadian Labour Congress,
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November 13, 1985